

CHARLOTTE PENCE

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How to Measure Distance*

I. Only Use Light Years When Talking to the General Public

or to squirrels testing spring between two branches. Or to a new mother saddened by thoughts of earth and its death; sun's death; her death. She watches her husband leave the room for a burp cloth, wonders, could she do it without him? What's the measurement of distance between two people growing too close, too quickly?

II. The Measures We Use Depend on What We Are Measuring

Distance between parents? Hills? Rogue comets? Within our solar system, distance is measured in Astronomical Units. Or "A.U.," an abbreviation that sounds similar to the "ow" of a toe stub. Or similar to the sound of a mother teaching the beginning of all sound. "Ah, eh, ee, oo, uu." Watch her mouth widen, purr, and close. This is the measurement for what we call breath.

III. For Most Everything Else—Stars, Galaxies, Etc...—the Distance Unit Is the Parsec (pc). This Is a Convenient Unit

for gathering groceries, grains in silos, gasses we cannot package and discount.

*This is convenient, too, when measuring
stars' distances by triangulation.
1 pc = 3.26 light years =
about the distance to the nearest star.*

An equal sign leading to an “about.”

An estimate. A close enough.

Close enough feels safer than being wrong.
Or exact. “Close enough,” we say of that
asteroid skimming past our atmosphere’s skin.
“Close enough,” we say when he returns
with a guest towel.

IV. For Distances Within our Galaxy or Other Galaxies, It Is Kiloparsecs

She is unsure what fatherhood will do
to him. Accurate measurements require
one to know where one stands, where one belongs,
where one is going. Rub the toe
of the blue shoe into the dust. See how
the dust is not a bit bluer. The shoe,
a bit browner. Distance = a thing
between and against.

V. The Exception to These Units Is When One Is Studying a Smaller Object

Father to mother to early zygote.
Branch to squirrel to tail-twitch and release.
Knee to toe to spring mud too soft to flake.
No units for these.

VI. One Might Say, "Its Radius Is 5 Solar Radii", Meaning It Is 5 Times the Size of Our Sun

Her fear is five times the size of sun, five
times the hours of sleep or lack thereof.
Five times the huddle of father, mother,
child. Five times the energy created
for one nap as opposed to the length
of that nap, that leap.

VII. She Wants Answers

but is realizing that won't happen.
She fears the truth that nothing stays the same.
Rashes fade, yet skin will prickle again.
Cries will quiet, yet the quiet will cry.
The man will leave, yet the same man will leave
again. That's why eyes are bloodshot, why she
answers questions as if she doesn't care.
All answers are "almost" or "about"—
everything moving. And this thing called light
years is a distance she can't comprehend.
Yet somewhere she squirms at one forever-
changing end of it.

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